

# Civil Rights Trip Is Personal Journey

By Emily Heil

Roll Call Staff

March 9, 2011, Midnight



Courtesy Byron Buck

*From left: Reps. Mike Quigley and Sheila Jackson Lee, Kerry Kennedy and House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala.*

Members of Congress might not be so different from the BlackBerrys they carry.

The gadgets need to recharge every now and then, House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer noted — and so do lawmakers. The Maryland Democrat, speaking to a group travelling across Alabama to the sites of the civil rights movement, described his own purpose for attending the annual Congressional trip: plugging in to seminal events of the past in order to confront the challenges of today.

“It’s not just learning, but being reinvigorated and revived,” said Hoyer, who has made the trip many times. “It’s being told once again that it wasn’t just ‘them’ and ‘their time’ because there are people in our time who don’t get it.”

Many of the 16 Members of Congress describe the lessons that they learned on the three-day journey, led by Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) and sponsored by the Faith and Politics Institute, in similar terms.

Some joined the trip, which took lawmakers and other guests to churches, parks and museums, in order to revisit their own place in the movement.

Assistant Leader James Clyburn remembers meeting his wife, Emily, in a jail where they were both serving time for protesting. The South Carolina Democrat wants to make sure that the civil rights story is complete, that it includes the chapters that took place in his home state.

“In South Carolina, so much of what happened was never recorded,” Clyburn said. “I like to see how the history is being told, how it all weaves together.”

Others came to fill in gaps in their own experience. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid was a young Capitol Police officer in 1963 during the now-historic march on Washington, D.C., organized by Martin Luther King Jr.

“I remember seeing yellow bus after yellow bus after yellow bus,” the Nevada Democrat said. “I didn’t know there were that many yellow buses in the world.”

Reid said he wanted to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Lewis, whom he called a dear friend, simply because he didn’t the first time. “I was not there that day, but it is why I am here today,” Reid said.

Sen. Tom Harkin sought a connection to the events that he watched unfold on television while he served in the Navy in the 1960s. The Iowa Democrat said he felt echoes of the civil rights protests that took place then in his own work in Congress securing rights for the disabled, and he wanted to pay tribute to the forebears of the disabled rights movement.

The protesters who fought for their right to vote and for equality “gave their heart and courage to another civil rights movement 25 years later,” Harkin said.

Others, particularly the younger Members of Congress, came on the trip as students. Leaving the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, Rep. Chris Van Hollen seemed struck by the words spoken inside the church by civil rights veteran Bernard Lafayette. Lafayette told the crowd that many people misunderstand the meaning of nonviolence, the core of the civil rights movement’s philosophy. Nonviolence, Lafayette said, doesn’t mean walking away from a threat.

Van Hollen found the message powerful. “It makes you reflect on your own obligations as a citizen — it’s not just to follow your own path of what’s right and ignore what’s around you, but to help others and fight for them,” the Maryland Democrat said. “This is an opportunity to take a fresh look at how things need to change and about the power of individual action.”

And for Rep. Terri Sewell, the journey was a chance to showcase her district, which includes the cities of Selma and Birmingham — both its needs and its hospitality.

Throughout the weekend, the Alabama Democrat spoke of the poverty in her district, reminding colleagues — in case the shattered storefront windows and abandoned buildings in downtown Selma weren’t enough — that the median income among her constituents is \$30,000 for a family of four.

On Sunday, Sewell welcomed her fellow Members of Congress to the church that she has attended since childhood, the Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Selma, pointing out the pew where she “grew up” and circulating like a host during a barbecue lunch in the church’s cafeteria.

Sewell, who is the first black woman to be elected to Congress from Alabama, asked the lawmakers to stand so she could introduce them to her constituents. "Now I get to call them colleagues," she said. "God bless America."